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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses sexist symbols in editorial cartoons and how these symbols can affect thought processes and language structure. Through overgeneralization, women are portrayed in cartoons as small in stature and are placed in roles subordinate to men. Other cartoons present women as physically weak and needing male protection, or as being sexually well-developed. The presupposition here is that there is something innately different in the thought processes, emotions, and psyches of men and women. This paper maintains that extending these false images through cartoon illustrations perpetuates and reinforces the symbol after it no longer applies. (HAI)

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SEXISM IN THE MEDIA: WORD AND IMAGE

In the late 1960's when I first began studying sexism in relation to language, I had no intention of getting involved in the feminist movement or in sexism beyond the confines of language. I thought I had a discrete topic that could be looked at from a scholarly "outside" viewpoint. But the more I have worked with language and sexism, the more I have become convinced that language--or more broadly, communication--is central to the whole problem. I cannot study linguistic sexism without looking at sexism in general, nor do I think anyone can come to an understanding of sexism in American culture without looking at how it has been fostered by the very nature of human communication.

Sexism runs much deeper in the language than it would appear on the surface where we can easily spot sexist usages and terminologies. It pervades our thought processes and the deep structure of language where our symbols and metaphors are created. The kind of communication that best illustrates how this works is the symbolic or pictorial representations that we see throughout modern mass media in advertisements, cartoons, and illustrations. My thesis is that the very nature of mass media communication is such that it works against a fair and accurate presentation of women in three distinct, but related, ways which I will describe as:

1. overgeneralization,
2. exaggeration, and
3. extension.

In developing this thesis I have used as a corpus for analysis the 1977

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edition of Best Editorial Cartoons of the Year edited by Charles Brooks, published by Pelican Publishing Company. I have restricted myself to this representative collection so that I would not be tempted to exaggerate my findings by searching out unrepresentative extremes. However, using this pre-collected sampling does have a disadvantage in that the examples I will cite are all taken from one form of mass media communication. Nevertheless I am confident that the same principles are at work wherever pictorial or symbolic (either visual or verbal) representations are created.

First I will give you some overall statistics about the corpus which show that indeed females are portrayed differently than are males, and then I will discuss the processes of overgeneralization, exaggeration, and extension which underlie these differences. The 326 cartoons which are reprinted in the book were chosen as the most outstanding to appear on editorial pages during the 1976 calendar year. 232 of the cartoons include only male characters, 13 include only female characters, and 58 show both males and females (some have no humans). In counting numbers of individual male compared to individual female characters, crowd scenes were excluded. All together, the artists drew 544 male individuals as compared to 81 female individuals.

The largest percentage of female characters appeared in two sections of the book, both closely related to sex. In the section on the Wayne Hays scandal there were nine females as compared to 17 males. There were also three bras, one playboy bunny costume, and 1 chastity belt. The other section where women were frequently pictured dealt with President Carter's interview with Playboy Magazine. Here 10 women were drawn in comparison to 20 men.

Judging from the names listed in the index, the cartoonists are newspapermen in the literal sense of the word. It appears that only two out of

130 are women. These two women, Etta Hulme and Kate Palmer, produced five of the 326 cartoons. It is interesting that four out of these five cartoons included females in prominent positions. This is obviously a far greater proportion than the overall average in which only 71 out of 326 included any female characters at all. This difference is at least suggestive of the idea that if and when the numbers of female editorial cartoonists increase, there will be more pictures of women and more cartoons reflecting a female perspective. Even the organization of the book suggests a male perspective. For example, one of the biggest issues to women in 1976 was the question of abortion, but there is no section devoted to this. There is only one cartoon touching on the issue and it appears in the section on crime where a man is asking, "Why is it that those who yell loudest against capital punishment howl the loudest for abortion?"

Two out of the 326 cartoons related directly to the feminist movement. The most obvious one showed a group of "stormtroopers" with HEW armbands, a paddy wagon, a gun, and a ferocious dog. They were gathered under a child's tree house decorated with the stereotypical sign, "Keep Out No Girls Alowd." The big burly leader is shouting through a bullhorn, "You don't stand a chance! We've already captured your fellow criminals in the all-boy choir and the father-son picnic!"

The other one showed a crowd standing outside The White House fence watching President and Mrs. Ford come down the walk. An excited tourist points a finger and exclaims, "Look...it's Betty Ford!" Now on the women's page of a newspaper, readers would expect to have their attention focused on Betty, rather than Gerald, or on Rosalynn, rather than Jimmy. But the whole point of the joke here is that it is a reverse twist to the philosophy which is built up throughout the rest of the book that males are infinitely more interesting than females. This is a joke only because it appeared on

the men's, rather than the women's page, of a newspaper.

Now that I have given substantial evidence to show that this collection of cartoons is based on the male, to the exclusion of the female, perspective, I will go on and look at some of the processes which contribute to this lopsidedness, starting first with overgeneralization.

Obviously with the time and space restrictions that media people have, an illustration is no place to introduce new role models unless they are the main point of the story. For example, a Reg Manning cartoon pointed out the increasingly important role of malpractice suits in medicine. Manning drew a patient on an operating table surrounded by the traditional team of surgeons, anaesthesiologists, and nurses. Added to the group were a "Patient's Attorney" and a "Doctor's Attorney." It was to these two figures that Manning wanted to draw the reader's attention. He therefore wanted everything else to be as typical as possible. Since 90% of the surgeons and attorneys in the United States are male and 90% of the nurses are female, he naturally drew the surgeons and attorneys as male and the nurses as female. It is understandable that when an artist wants to suggest efficiently a background scene without drawing attention to it, he or she will portray whatever occurs the most often in real life. Cumulatively this results in overgeneralization because when each artist does this, the result is that occupations and roles that in real life are filled by males or females, respectively, in ratios of sixty to ninety-nine percent of the time are inaccurately portrayed throughout media illustrations as being filled by the dominant sex 100% of the time. An indication of the effect of this kind of overgeneralization is the fact that out of 25 main sections of the book, there were no females pictured in the following seven sections: Presidential Debates, Death of Mao, The Post Office, Morality, Education, Southern Africa, and Russia. In some of these areas it is obvious that women

do play a less important role than men, but certainly they are not totally absent as the overgeneralized cartoon drawings would make it seem.

Cartoonists necessarily rely on symbols to get their messages across. Because they have only a single frame in which to tell a story, the most they can do is to present concentrated food for thought which readers' minds puff up and fill out to tell the rest of the story. One of the miracles of life is that each human is a unique individual, but the process of symbolization necessitates grouping people together and minimizing individual differences. Symbols have to relate only to the most obvious elements of the people they represent and they must have some easily identifiable connection. They have to be iconic or relate closely to the real word so that viewers or readers can figure them out inductively. No one goes to a dictionary to look up meanings for the kinds of symbols that advertisers and cartoonists use.

In the world there are really very few universals upon which symbols can be based. Especially now that cartoonists are interested in communicating throughout the world, they find it increasingly difficult to come up with symbols which will be understood by everyone. For example, in our culture and throughout the Northern hemisphere one of the most common symbolic representations is that of a person's life following the pattern of the seasons of the year. Birth and childhood are equated with spring, youth with summer, middle age with fall, and old age and death with winter. But this metaphor does not hold up iconically for people who live in a climate where there are no seasons. Likewise, a snake in the grass isn't a very good symbol for communicating with Eskimos who have had no experience with either snakes or grass. Nor, for a different reason, is a picture of someone dressed in black to represent evil as opposed to someone dressed in white to represent goodness and purity a very good symbol for communicating

with people who have dark skin.

The result of this kind of increased demand being placed on symbolization is that the value has gone up for those symbols that are based on true universals. It is these symbols that everyone can understand. They are therefore used over and over again. One of the few universals that affects every human being is the fact that living creatures come in two varieties: male and female. And since males and females do have basic physical differences which are perfectly obvious to everyone many symbolic representations have been based on overgeneralized views of these differences. For example, it is a true fact that adult males are on the average slightly bigger than adult females. But certainly we all know many women who are taller than men. Nevertheless, artists nearly always portray males as being taller than females. In only one of the 326 cartoons in the sample was there a female who stood taller than a comparable male. She was a muscular Russian athlete coming to the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Even here there was still a bigger man--obviously the leader--who was looking ahead to the 1980 Olympics in Moscow and was confidentially reminding his teammates that this was their "Last chance to defect till 1984."

This kind of overgeneralization sometimes results in portrayals which are patently false. For example, in real life girls grow faster than boys so with children of the same age the girls will on the average be bigger than the boys. But because of overgeneralization, little girls in pictures are nearly always drawn as being smaller than boys appearing in the same picture. Photographers who are taking family portraits accomplish the same effect by having stools and cushions to slip under the males so that they will appear taller than the females.

The spooky thing about this sort of overgeneralization is that pretty soon we forget that it is symbolic and we begin to believe that anyone who does not fit the pattern of the symbol is deviant. Those of you who are convinced that art only reflects and records life as it is, but does not shape life, should think of how many potential romances have never developed because the man and woman did not fit the stereotyped image of her being shorter and smaller than he was. Another place that we can see how people bend their behavior to fit the stereotyped image is in the teen magazines where advertisements show the undesirability of a boy being "a 98 pound weakling." He is encouraged to buy weight-lifting sets to increase his size. Advertisements for girls show before-and-after dieting pictures stressing the desirability of smallness. The exercises they do are reducing exercises, except for those designed to increase the size of the bust, which brings us to the next point, which is that of exaggeration.

Because women universally have breasts and men don't, illustrators use the drawing of breasts to distinguish between males and females. And just as with all features that cartoonists want to draw attention to, the size of them is exaggerated. We never see a flat busted woman in a cartoon unless the artist wants to show us that she is somehow unsexy or unattractive. This kind of exaggeration or caricature is a well accepted part of cartooning. For example, the cartoon selected for the book's cover is nothing more than a caricatured portrait of Jimmy Carter drawn by Bill Garner. By actual measurement with a ruler, Jimmy's teeth are shown to be bigger than either his nose or his chin. Even though we all know that this is an exaggeration, we accept it with good humor as an appropriate rendition of the personality President Carter showed on the campaign trail. Few women are considered important enough to have individual caricatures made of them. Instead the

exaggerations are made about women as a class or a group. They are shown as stereotypes: the funny little old woman, the sexy secretary, the interfering mother or mother-in-law, the sweet young innocent, etc. One of these stereotypes which is an exaggeration of an actual difference between male and female bodies is that women are weak. It is true that adult men have a larger percentage of muscle tissue in their bodies than do adult females, so with a male and a female of similar body build, age, and health the male will probably be physically stronger than the female. Strength is harder to show than size but the nature of editorial cartoons is such that the artist often has a need to show that one party is weaker than the other. What the artist does then to symbolize the weakness is simply to make the representative female. There were five such cartoons in the collection. In one, Earl Butz and his chauffer have just knocked down a pedestrian. As they drive away, Mr. Butz calmly observes, "Being Earl Butz means never having to say you're sorry." In another one, also involving an automobile, a runaway car identified as "U. S. Organizations Supporting Partisan Irish Groups" is about to run over a woman with her children. They are labelled "Irish Peace Movement." In real life, the difference in strength between a man and a woman is nothing that would protect a male pedestrian anymore than a female pedestrian in a collision with a car, but the artist is careful to use females because the concept of feminine is symbolically tied up in our psyches with the concept of weakness. For the same reason, artist Herc Ficklen drew two battered little girls labelled "Child Abuse" standing on top of the world under the caption "Speaking of Issues..." Before puberty, male children are not any stronger or more able to defend themselves from abuse than are female children, but still the artist draws a girl because she is a better symbol for weakness. In a cartoon by Bill Andrews, a big western bully named "Defense Contractors" comes up to a little old lady with a broken leg

who is sitting in a wheelchair labelled, "Health Education and Welfare." He says to her, "This town ain't big enough for both of us!" Obviously she is going to get the worst end of the deal. But a little old man with a broken leg in a wheel chair probably would not fare much better.

Using women as a symbolic representation for physical weakness sets the stage for the really interesting communication process which is that of extension. It is only a very small step from using the concept of femaleness as a symbol for physical weakness to using it as a symbol for mental or emotional weakness. In the cartoons about Southern Africa, there were 37 portrayals of males and not a single female except where cartoonist Hy Rosen dressed Ian Smith in women's clothing and showed her/him being taken up the river by a sporting Henry Kissinger. Similarly in the section on Russia no females were shown except for a drawing of Breznev in women's clothing. She/he was being hugged by President Ford who was singing a parody of the song from Oklahoma, "Don't say, 'Detente,' to me...Don't drink my Cokes too much...Don't laugh at my jokes too much...People will say we're in love." In both instances the concept of femaleness was used as a symbol to show the potential of someone being easily manipulated or fooled.

Already we have a symbol that does not accurately reflect real life, but then through literary extension it progresses further and further so that what we have ended up with are dead symbols, comparable to dead metaphors. In language a metaphor gives us a fresh insight through the use of words that compare something we know about to something that we are just learning about. When a metaphor has been used so much that the hearers no longer get a mental picture of both the old and the new referents then what we have is a dead metaphor. The word window is a dead metaphor. Long before the invention of glass, a window was a wind eye--a hole in the wall of a house through which the wind could pass like a thread passes through the eye of a

needle. We have long since forgotten the metaphor of the eye as shown by our changed pronunciation and by the fact that in modern airtight buildings the glass portions are called windows even though they are never opened to let the wind in.

Dead symbols develop in the same way that dead metaphors develop. We know they are dead when they no longer relate to actual features of the referent. Femaleness as a general symbol for weakness is a dead--but at the same time very much used--symbol. Symbolic extension has brought the concept of sex differences to things that have no sex such as colors, behaviors, and inanimate objects. As symbols go, it is unusual in that it has come full circle and instead of teaching people about the new referent, it teaches people about the old referent. In most cases we can see the new referent, whether it is "feminine" art, "feminine" rhyme in poetry, or "feminine" colors such as pink contrasted with "masculine" blue. The thing that we can not see is the presupposition, the idea that there is something innately different in the thought processes, the emotions, or the psyches of women and men. The result is that our thinking is constantly being shaped and reinforced by a creature of our own making. Until we stop and take a good hard look at this creature, we will continue to perpetuate stereotypes that become self fulfilling prophesies especially today when the power of the mass media means that ideas and symbols which used to be developed and communicated over a century are now communicated to all parts of the world overnight.